

## Language, Identity, and Translation in J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*

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### ABSTRACT

*John Millington Synge's play The Playboy of the Western World features the playwright's adoption of Hiberno-English, a mixture of English and Irish, to highlight a peculiar Irish identity. This unique language feature, simultaneously similar to and different from Standard English, marks the playwright's resistance to British colonization and his Irish cultural identity. By reading Synge's The Playboy of the Western World, the translated versions of the play from English to Chinese, and translation theories by Eugene Nida and Walter Benjamin, this paper discusses Synge's Irish identity via the lens of language and translation. It was found that the use of language in The Playboy and the Western World signals Synge's strong sense of indigenous language and the emphasis on highlighting one's language awareness and cultural identity. This inextricably linked relationship between language and identity is evidenced by Synge's play and reinforced by Perng's and Chang's Chinese translations.*

*Keywords: language; identity; translation; J. M. Synge; The Playboy of the Western World*

### INTRODUCTION

The enormous impact of language on shaping one's identity has been widely accepted. In a similar fashion, as contemporary translation theorists such as Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere argue, translation is never a value-free endeavour but an activity that carries one's subjectivity and the influence of hegemony in specific socio-cultural contexts (1998, pp. 135-138). Notably, language is often a subjective choice, and translation is indicative of the translator's personal evaluation. Both language and translation help highlight the fluctuating nature of one's identity and the dynamism of literary meaning. This dynamic interplay between language and literature becomes much more complicated when the literary text is a hybrid of diverse languages and an outcome of translation to a certain extent. John Millington Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World* is an illustration. This paper discusses the complexities of language features in relation to literary meanings and interpretations by investigating the interlocking relationship between language, identity, and translation in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and its Chinese translations. Synge is arguably one of the best twentieth-century Irish writers. Among his plays, *The Playboy of the Western World* is highly regarded by critics and the public. The play is the most famous work in the Abbey Theater, founded by Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory in 1904 (Greene, 2009, p. 154; Morash, 2005, p. 329). As Nicholas Greene contends, Synge's blend of comic scenes and serious topics renders it much more challenging when interpreting the play (1985, pp. 132-33). Although Synge is not a prolific playwright, his leverage in Irish literature has increased (Mathews, 2009, p. 3). Synge's plays inspire not only contemporary Irish playwrights Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, and

Frank McGuinness, but also American playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, Australian playwrights like Louis Esson, and European playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht, and West Indian writers such as Derek Walcott. His influence on 20th-century Italian, Polish, and Czech playwrights is also credited (Bibbò, 2019, pp. 50-52; Keane, 2016, pp. 36-37; Pilny, 2011, pp. 153-155). According to P. J. Mathews, of Synge's limited numbers of literary works, *The Playboy of the Western World* is arguably the most influential and well-known; Mathews even acclaims it as "a work of dramatic excellence" (2009, p. 4). Charlotte McIvor attributes the play's uniqueness to "its ability to index the broader role and function of Irish theatre within local and globalized networks" (2016, pp. 39-40). Anthony Roche maintains that Synge's sustaining influence on contemporary Irish playwrights sees no sign of waning, an unparalleled achievement in twentieth-century Irish literature (2009, p. 173).

In twentieth-century Irish drama, Synge is famous for depicting the west of Ireland in unique Irish English. According to Giulia Bruna, most of his plays feature the use of Hiberno-English to delineate rural Ireland (2017, p. 2). Synge's creation is closely related to diverse languages and translations. As Roche argues, compared with the other writers of the Irish Literary Revival, such as Yeats and Lady Gregory, Synge is more adept in a wide range of languages, including French, German, Hebrew, Irish, and English (2013, p. 46-47). By reading *The Playboy of the Western World* and the two Chinese translations by Perng Ching-hsi and Chang Tsung-chi, from English to Chinese, coupled with translation theories by Eugene Nida and Walter Benjamin, this paper discusses the nexus between Synge and the Irish identity, how Synge used the English language differently, how language and identity are inextricably linked via *The Playboy and the Western World* and the Chinese translations. Perng's and Chang's translations are included because they are conducive to foregrounding the peculiar feature of Irish English in Synge's play and simultaneously illuminating Synge's indigenous Irish identity.

This paper argues that Synge's use of Irish English echoes his pragmatic attitude toward the Irish identity—while catering to the reality that the English language is dominant in the twentieth century, it accentuates similar-but-not-exactly-identical identity politics that demarcates the speaker's peculiar characteristics. This peculiarity makes reading Synge's plays challenging and, consequently, the translation of his plays hugely demanding. This difficulty has been previously examined. Johannes Kleinstuck testifies to the "difficulty, if not the impossibility, of translating him" (1979, p. 272). This challenge is echoed by Anthony Roche, who notes that given the difficulty of Synge's language, Max Meyerfeld, the first translator of Synge's play *The Well of the Saints* into German, even asked Synge for help to translate his Hiberno-English into plain English (2013, p. 55). According to Roche, this exemplary difficulty derives from the fact that "Synge fashioned a distinctive dramatic speech of his own, but one whose sheer originality resisted translation" (2013, p. 55).

Although the plethora of existing research on Synge's use of language is insightful, these research findings mainly focus on language and identity in the Irish context. By bringing the two Chinese translations of *The Playboy of the Western World* into the discussion, this paper aims to broaden the scope of extant research. It is expected that, via a comparative study of Synge's play and its translations, the language features typical of Synge's plays and the cultural identity relevant to these language attributes will be highlighted. While rendering the familiar unfamiliar (for English readers) and the unfamiliar familiar (for Chinese readers), translations and relevant discussions help investigate Synge's language and identity anew, utilizing a different vision. In addition to this introduction, the remaining part falls into three sections—(1) Language Politics and the Irish Identity (2) Synge, *The Playboy*, and Translation (3) Conclusion.

## LANGUAGE POLITICS AND THE IRISH IDENTITY

Irish had been widely used before the British invasion of Ireland in the twelfth century. In the fourteenth century, “The Statute of Kilkenny” (1366) outlawed the use of the Irish language and customs by the English who lived in the part of Ireland under British rule. Henry VIII’s “Act for the English Order, Habite, and Language” (1537) was a significant attempt by the colonizers to start the Anglicisation of the native Irish. However, these efforts were not effective in wiping out the use of Irish in Ireland. The Irish language did not come under pressure until the seventeenth century, when the Irish were defeated by the British. In the eighteenth century, an increasing number of Irish people turned to English for having more power under the British system. In the nineteenth century, more and more Irish used English because the Irish language was associated with poverty, defeat, and hunger. It is primarily because many poor and underprivileged Irish speakers died in the Great Famine between 1845 and 1849. The decline of Irish reached its apex by the end of the nineteenth century, with roughly 38000 Irish speakers in 1891 (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2005, p. 102). Language enthusiasts insisted that urgent measures be taken to curb such a drastic decline. Therefore, the Gaelic League, launched and led by Douglas Hyde in 1893, was established to help stop the Irish language from fading. Hyde’s thought-provoking essay “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland,” delivered in 1890, was pivotal in calling his compatriots’ attention to the vital role language plays against the colonizer.

Aside from the efforts made by Gaelic League to promote Irish and depreciate English, Irish people’s antipathy to British colonization and the enforced language policy are evidenced in the language strategies adopted by some Irish writers such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Synge. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Daedalus’s notion that “[t]he language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine .... I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech” showcases the Irish’s (probably Joyce’s own) uneasiness about using English (Joyce, 1996, p. 172). Joyce’s playful experiment with the English language is so idiosyncratic that some academics even regard Joyce’s writings as his revenge on the English language (Bernstein, 1994, p. 269). Moreover, the fact that Beckett chooses to expatriate and use French as the medium of his literary creation signifies this Nobel laureate’s strategic resistance to the imposed colonial language (Talib, 2002, p. 29).

Unlike Joyce and Beckett, Synge adopts Irish English, a particular variant of English, combining Gaelic and English. This type of English, also called Hiberno-English, Gaelic English, or Irish English, is greatly influenced by the traditional Irish language and features differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, or syntax (Todd, 1989, pp. 36-46). For example, Synge uses many words from Irish English in *The Playboy of the Western World*. In the play, the word “devil” becomes “divil” (2008, pp. 75, 79, 96, 99), and the word “paralytic” is replaced by “parlatic” (2008, p. 109). Instead of saying “thirsty” and “darling,” “droughty” (2008, p. 78) and “darlint” (2008, p. 109) are used, respectively. The linguistic features of Irish English can also be found in some unique usage and spelling. In Synge’s play, the word “saw” is replaced by “seen,” so readers can read something like “Is it a man you seen?” (2008, p. 71). Moreover, readers will find some ungrammatical spellings or expressions, so “hurted” (2008, p. 71) rather than “hurt” is used in the lines. Additionally, sentences such as “The peelers is fearing him” (2008, p. 78) deviate from the standard use of English.

In addition to the difference in pronunciation, spelling, and vocabulary, Irish English is characterized by its distinctive syntax. The omission of relative pronouns is a case in point. Accordingly, in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, you will read sentences like "Is it you's the man killed his father" (2008, p. 88), or "And he a poor fellow would get drunk on the smell of a pint" (2008, p. 99). Additionally, abundant use of non-standard present participle recurs in the play, such as "Isn't it long the nights are now, Shawn Keogh, to be leaving a poor girl with her own self counting the hours to the dawn of day?" (2008, p. 70) and "What right have you to be making game of a poor fellow for minding the priest" (2008, p. 73). Another unusual usage is the word "and," which is often used to connect a subordinate clause without any finite verb. For example, in Synge's play, readers will find expressions such as "And you that length walking the world" (2008, p. 89) and "With that sun came out between the cloud and the hill, and it shining green in my face" (2008, p. 91). Moreover, the word "when" is used differently in Irish English because it is often followed by structures with the future tense rather than the present tense. Examples can be found in Synge's *The Playboy*: "Well, God bless you, Christy, and a good rest till we meet again when the sun'll be rising to the noon of the day" (2008, p. 79).

Furthermore, words such as "the way," "in a way," and "the ways" mean "thus" and "so" in Irish English, which also recur in Synge's play: "Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the Judgment Day" (2008, p. 121). Another significant usage widely employed in Synge's play is the "be + after" structure, which is used along with a recently finished action in Irish English. For example, in Act I, when Shawn Keogh, Pegeen Mike's fiancée, reminds her of their relationship, he remarks: "Aren't we after making a good bargain, the way we're only waiting these days on Father Reilly's dispensation from the bishops, or the Court of Rome" (2008, p. 70). A similar structure is used in the same Act when Widow Quin tells Pegeen, "I am after meeting Shawn Keogh and Father Reilly below, who told me of your curiosity man, and the fearing by this time he was maybe roaring, romping on your hands with drink" (2008, p. 83). By the same token, in Act II, when Old Mahon complains to Widow Quin about Christy, he growls, "Amn't I after saying it is himself has me destroyed, and he a liar on walls, a talker of folly, a man you'd see stretched the half of the day in the brown ferns with his belly to the sun" (2008, p. 99). These adaptations of English in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* demonstrate salient features of Irish English.

This adoption of Irish English betrays a singular language identity and cultural identity in tandem. In the Preface written for *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge expressed the rationale for his choice of words. According to Synge, most expressions in the play, which come from everyday conversations he learns in the countryside, mirror the language commonly used by Irish villagers. Many dialogues in the play, Synge acknowledged, derive either from the conversations of farmers and fishers along the coast from Kerry to Mayo or from beggar-women or ballad singers near Dublin (2008, p. 67). This poetic language and the unique cultural surroundings in the great outdoors in Ireland inspire Synge and nurture his imagination. As Synge specifies near the end of the Preface,

In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry. In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks.

(2008, p. 68)

In other words, Synge considers wild nature in the countryside crucial in providing Irish writers with creative imagination, making their writings exceptional. In addition, Irish writers benefit tremendously from the musical and melodious Irish English, which is characterized by its difference in vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax. Crucially, while re-fashioning and re-inventing the traditional English language via Irish English, Synge casts into doubt the validity of Standard English brought by colonizers and simultaneously articulates a particular cultural identity. This language strategy is in keeping with many Celtic Revivalists' expectation "to create a literature that, though English in language, should be Irish in character" (Beckett, 1988, p. 54).

Language has constantly been taken as a significant element in highlighting one's identity (Joseph, 2004, p. 94). Using the same language is widely adopted as an essential criterion in evaluating different individuals' national identities. The hybridised Irish English, which creates a language that is almost the same but with a clear difference, provides the Irish with an approach to their identity, differentiating themselves from their colonisers linguistically, culturally, and politically. Given the dedication of the Gaelic League led by Douglas Hyde and the endeavours of Irish Literary Revivalists, this consolidation of cultural identity through language is significant. According to Patrick J. Duffy, to promote the national spirit, Yeats and Synge devoted themselves to eulogizing the indigenous culture as embodied by the West of Ireland (1997, pp. 64-66). However, Synge is by no means a radical cultural nationalist who is so all-embracing to everything Irish as to be blind to the problems of his local culture. Identifying himself as a mild nationalist (Synge, 1982, p. 13), Synge practically approaches his own culture, positive and negative aspects alike. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge alludes to the British coloniser's hegemony. One episode in Act I refers to the police's intrusion into local people's peaceful everyday life (2008, pp. 74-75). Synge's criticism of some landlords' maltreatment of their tenants is conspicuous in the play (2008, pp. 53-54). Nonetheless, aside from his critique of colonial exploitation, Synge never turns a blind eye to the drawbacks of Irish society. For example, manipulation of the Catholic Church is satirized in Synge's depiction of Shawn Keogh, a cowardly character who is overly preoccupied with religion and is unduly manipulated by the dictates of the Catholic Church. Therefore, as he told Pegeen's father, "I'm afeard of Father Reilly, and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard I did the like of that" (2008, p. 72).

In a similar vein, Synge's criticism of his native land extends to its use of language. Notwithstanding his compliments on the Irish language, Synge is aware of the disadvantages of Irish culture. More than once, Synge castigates the Gaelic League for their over-idealised efforts to promote the Irish language and culture because, according to him, such efforts are deceptive and irresponsible (Titley, 2009, pp. 95-97). As Synge argues in "Can We Go Back into Our Mother's Womb," a letter written to the Gaelic League, it is naïve to expect all Irish people to speak Gaelic in the near future as the language is steadily on the decline (1982, p. 399). Discontented with this whimsical thinking, he asserts that "[t]he Gaelic League is founded on a doctrine that is made up of ignorance, fraud and hypocrisy" (1982, p. 399).

Synge's practical attitude toward his native culture, in conjunction with his Anglo-Irish background, illustrates his selection of Irish English rather than pure Irish as the language of his creation. According to Declan Kiberd, Synge may have attempted to write his plays in Irish but gave up because, while he had a good command of spoken Irish, his Irish writing competence was not good enough for literary creation (1993, p. 92). Therefore, Irish English serves as the best medium for Synge in his plays. This deliberate choice of language helps broaden his readership, allowing both Irish and English speakers to access his works. Simultaneously, while the unique characteristics of Irish English are accentuated, the colonized people's political and cultural

awareness, one which features a solid Irish identity, is highlighted. Therefore, as George Cusack contends, “[r]ather than fetishizing the pre-colonial past, Synge sought to unlock its potential to disrupt the colonial identity projected onto Ireland by England and thus create a new identity” (2009, p. 121). Additionally, according to Nursen Gömceli and James Allan, through the hybrid of Hiberno-English, Synge succeeds in integrating a traditional language (Gaelic) with a new language (English) and simultaneously demonstrates that “a unique national identity distinct from the identity imposed by the colonizing power can be formed” (2015, p. 114).

However, Synge’s comic portrayal of the villagers and Irish women who live in the countryside in the Irish language enraged headstrong nationalists, causing the turmoil in the Abbey Theater when the play was first performed in 1907. The riot and its aftermaths were so torrential that Yeats had to endorse Synge, scolding the rioters for their vulgarity and lack of culture (Hirsh, 1988, p. 101; King, 2004, p. 88). As Christopher Murray asserts, although Synge is involved in disseminating Irish nationalism, he is a satirical revolutionary (1997, p. 87). Consequently, the image of Ireland in Synge’s plays is far from idealistic, and this pragmatic attitude to one’s own culture, positive and negative alike, pushes for a thorough self-reflection of the Irish society (1997, p. 87). According to Shaun Richards, *The Playboy* is set in the West of Ireland, a sanctuary for Irish nationalists, but Synge never hesitates to criticise the Irish society in the lines (2009, pp. 28-29). These arguments throw into relief Synge’s eclecticism in promoting the merits of Irish culture and scrutinizing its shortcomings.

### SYNGE, *THE PLAYBOY*, AND TRANSLATION

Synge’s use of Hiberno-English indicates his defiance against the British hegemony and his strategic plan to express an Irish identity through language. The uniqueness of Synge’s language appears crystal-clear in the process of translation, which will be further explicated in Perng’s and Chang’s renditions in the following.

How to translate has been a matter of contention among translation academics. To clarify the effectiveness of translation in different languages, American scholar Eugene Nida puts forward the notion of equivalence, including formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence (1964, p. 159). According to Nida, formal equivalence stresses the consistency between receptor language and source language in form and content. In comparison, dynamic equivalence requires that the connection between translation and targeted readers be tantamount to that between the source language and its readers. In other words, formal equivalence emphasises the one-to-one correspondence between the source language and the target language and is thus similar to the traditional concept of direct translation. Dynamic equivalence pays special attention to recapturing the essence of the source language in the act of reading. As a result, it is closer to free translation. Although no specific theory is referred to in Chang’s rendition of *The Playboy*, Nida’s concept of dynamic equivalence seems to be followed. It is because the primary concern in Chang’s translation is to introduce Synge’s original text to Chinese readers by adopting the vocabulary and syntax appropriate for the target language and its social context.

Notably, Synge is not only a playwright but a translator. He is most remembered for rendering Petrarch’s sonnets into English. However, compared with his plays, Synge’s medieval and Renaissance poetry translations have been less investigated, a phenomenon prevalent in world literature because, as Reed Way Dasenbrock argues, “translations tend to receive less attention than original compositions” (1985, p. 33). Although Synge did not systematically present his

translation theory, his notions of translation are available in his prose writings. For example, in “A Translation of Irish Romance,” a review of A. H. Leany’s *Heroic Romance of Ireland*, Synge identifies the qualities of an excellent translator, including fearlessness, enthusiasm, and the scholar’s conscience” (1982, p. 373). These criteria are general, but they demonstrate Synge’s view that translation is a demanding task requiring valor, commitment, and a great sense of responsibility to reflect textual realities. However, it is not only faithfulness that counts, but the translator’s efforts to mirror the “spirit” and “style” of original texts (1982, p. 372-373). According to Synge, “plain literal” translations of literature, especially literature in verse versions, make them “somewhat unattractive” because while the main ideas are kept, the style and flavor are gone at the same time (1982, p. 371). This view can be further illustrated by discussing an episode and its translations in Act II.

Christy (Impressively): With the sun came out between the cloud and the hill, and it shining green in my face.  
‘God have mercy on your soul,’ says he, lifting a scythe. ‘Or your own,’ says I, raising the loy.  
(Synge, 2008, 91)

柯力斯: (加強印象) 話剛說完, 太陽就從雲山間出來, 照得我的臉暖烘烘的。[上帝可憐你的靈魂吧!] 他說著舉起一把鐮刀; [不然就可連你自己的吧!] 我說著舉起一把鋤頭。  
(Perng, 1970, p. 44)

克里斯帝: (令人欽佩的模樣)就在這個時候, 太陽從雲與山之間露臉, 是朝陽微微照著我的臉。他說, [上帝保佑你], 舉起大鐮刀。我說, [或是保佑你自己], 拿起斧頭。  
(Chang, 2012, p. 63)

This excerpt and the two translations demonstrate how Perng and Chang make a point to render Synge’s text authentically by closely adhering to the source language. Both translations generally follow Synge’s text thematically, so almost all the keywords in the source text (e.g., “the sun,” “the cloud,” “the hill,” “shining green,” and “in my face”) are covered in the translations. However, minor differences may arise in reference to specific words. These differences mainly derive from the translators’ interpretation of the original text and how they present their ideas. When translating Synge’s “God have mercy on your soul,” Perng’s rendition adheres to the source language in wording and syntax, with only a minor change (adding exclamation near the end) to highlight the tone of praying practiced in Chinese. In contrast, Chang’s translation features his restructuring of the original language, using “上帝保佑你” (meaning “May God bless you”) to represent Synge’s message. In addition, whereas Perng faithfully translates “the sun came out between the cloud and the hill” in the first sentence into “太陽就從雲山間出來,” Chang emulates Synge’s poetic language by using “太陽從雲與山之間露臉” (meaning the sun shows his face between the cloud and the hill), a strategy to animate the translation employing personification. These examples showcase both translators’ tendency to strive for faithful translation on the one hand and their endeavour to go beyond the limits of literal translation by considering Synge’s language style and linguistic features in the target language.

Nevertheless, no matter how hard translators try to balance the source and target languages, differences arise in translations. The following episode in which Pegeen, the female protagonist on whom Christy has a crush, complains to her father, exemplifies the disparity between original texts and translations.

Pegeen: If I am a queer daughter, it's a queer father'd be leaving me lonesome these twelve hours of dark, and I piling the turf with the dogs barking, and the calves mooning, and my own teeth rattling with the fear.  
(Synge, 2008, p. 72)

佩珍: 我如果是個怪女兒, 你就是個怪老爸, 竟然狠心留我自個兒度過黑漆漆的半天。我一邊堆泥煤, 一邊聽狗兒吠聲吠影, 還有牛的哞哞聲, 嚇得我牙齒不斷咯咯響。

(Chang, 2012, p. 32)

The preceding translation generally complies with the source language in terms of syntax. However, some minor differences can be found, particularly in voice- and color-related vocabulary. The phrase “twelve hours of dark” becomes 「黑漆漆的半天」 (*hei ci ci de bian tian*), and “with the dogs barking” becomes 「一邊聽狗兒吠聲吠影」 (*yi bian ting gou er fei sheng fey ing*). Moreover, “the calves mooing” becomes 「牛的哞哞聲」 (*niu de mou mou sheng*), and “my own teeth rattling with the fear” is translated into 「嚇得我牙齒不斷咯咯響」 (*xia de wo ya chi bu duan ge ge xiang*). The repeated words in the Chinese translation are meant to reinforce the visual as well as the auditory images in the source language. In the meantime, they are used to mirror the humor, sarcasm, and playfulness in the dialog between the father and the daughter in their intimate interactions.

To sum up, in Chang's translation, the primary concern is to re-capture the main idea of the source language and, via the language familiar to the targeted readers, convey similar messages and atmosphere in the translation. This approach echoes Nida's emphasis on naturalness in the act of translation—dynamic equivalence that calls for the similarity between the source and target languages (1964, p. 166). According to Nida, to make translation natural and reduce differences in meaning between source and target languages, translators should consider changing the vocabulary and syntax so that targeted readers can comprehend the messages through translation (1964, pp. 167-168).

Although Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence sounds reasonable, its real potential for translation in general and literary translation, in particular, is debatable. This challenge is evident in Chang's translation when the musical quality in Synge's text is taken into consideration. Take the following episode in Act I, for example.

Christy: (Laughing piteously) The like of king, is it? And I after toiling, moiling, dodging from the dawn till dusk with never a sight of joy or sport saving only when I'd be around in the dark night poaching rabbits on hill, for I was a devil to poach, God forgive me....

(Synge, 2008, p. 81)

克里斯蒂:(苦笑)像國王一樣嗎? 我可是從早忙到晚, 根本沒空享受或遊玩。到了黑夜, 我還要偷偷獵山上的野兔, 請上帝原諒我啊。

(Chang, 2012, pp. 47-48)

柯力斯:(苦笑)像國王一般, 你是說? 也不想我朝朝暮暮挖呀鏟的, 流血流汗; 要說玩樂或運動, 只有黑夜到山裡偷捕野兔, 因為我是偷獵的能手—上帝寬恕我。

(Perng, 1970, p. 31)



Although the main idea of the source language is generally interpreted in Chang's translation, the musicality peculiar to the original text disappears. In the second sentence in Synge's original text, many words with assonance and long vowels (e.g., toiling, moiling, dodging) and some lines with alliteration (dawn, dusk) are used to re-create the constant labor and fatigue that are inflicted on Christy. However, the deliberate arrangement of the musical quality cannot be translated literally; therefore, to a certain extent, the original meaning of the source language cannot be retained. Perng's translations, such as 「朝朝暮暮」 (zhao zhao mu mu) and 「流血流汗」 (liu xie liu han), demonstrate his ingenious re-creation of some musical characteristics in the source language. However, despite these efforts, his translation can only partially represent the soul and spirit of the original text.

Notably, Synge points out his notion of translation in *The Aran Islands*, proposing that it cannot be called a translation unless the translator can bring forth the musicality embedded in literary texts (1999, p. 86). Synge's primary concern in *The Aran Islands* is the shift between Irish and English. Synge, who manages to call readers' attention to the musical quality that is typical of the Irish language, is worried about the loss of meaning or musicality when the Irish language is translated into English, a concern which may derive from his training in music in college (Saddlemyer, 2011, pp. 16-17). This view echoes Synge's argument in the Preface to *the play, where* he asserts that the Irish language, which is abundant in local flavor and musical elements, is rare and should thus be cherished and well-preserved (2008, 68). Consequently, when evaluated from an auditory perspective, different versions of translation always leave something to be desired because no translators, neither Perng nor Chang, can claim to have successfully transmitted the musical quality to their renditions. The Irish language, which is extraordinary but idiosyncratic, makes Synge's lines poetic when used strategically alongside English in the play (Titley, 2009, p. 101). However, this poetic feature typical of Synge's plays doubles or even triples the complexity of interpreting the meaning and translating Synge's language. This problem, which seems to be an inherent challenge for most literary translators, especially translators of poetic drama, is highlighted in Melissa Sihra's critique:

Synge invented lyrical modes of expression through a tenacious renegotiation of Standard English in his unique interpretation of the deeply ingrained poetic cadences and liberating syntactical fibres of thinking in one tongue and speaking in another.... Synge's lively rhythmic dialect reveals his ear for music and his ability to speak Irish, enabling the words and phrases to reverberate with an energy that performs and transforms the characters' identities and realities through the speech act. (2011, pp. 230-231)

In other words, lyrical, rhythmic, and musical characteristics of Synge's writing, which derive from his excellent blend of English and Irish, make him a master of language art. This complexity is a bonus for Synge's readers but a challenge for his translators.

The problem mentioned above with literary translation does not necessarily mean the impossibility of translation. Ever since the 1980s, source language-oriented translation philosophy, dominant for the previous decades, has been questioned by deconstruction scholars. Breaking away from the source language-centered school that equates original texts to truth, deconstruction translators are opposed to the secondary status of translation. Walter Benjamin inspires deconstruction translation theorists' rejection of the marginality of translation. In his essay "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin casts doubt on traditional translation philosophy, especially the concept of faithfulness. According to Benjamin, the purpose of translation is not to re-produce the latent truth in original texts but to maintain harmonious complementation between the two texts

(2007, pp. 78-79). In other words, Benjamin argues that there should be no hierarchical relationship between the original text and its translation because both are “recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel” (2007, p. 78). By the same token, deconstruction translation theorists criticize one’s over-reliance on original texts as the only means of interpretation. For them, translation is no longer a mere copy of the original text but an invigorating attempt to add new meaning and life to the original via every re-reading and re-interpretation. In an essay titled “Des Tour de Babel,” Jacques Derrida proposes that when God deprives humans of one common language, He “at the same time imposes and forbids translation” (1992, p. 222). Conversely, translation activities are justified because, according to Derrida, translation pre-exists and is the debtor of the original text. Accordingly, the traditional hierarchical relationship between the original text and translation is overthrown (1992, p. 227). On the other hand, while translation is justified in Derrida’s discourse, the ever-changing nature and consequently the difficulty of translation is re-confirmed.

Granted that the original text and the universal truth conventionally attached to it are not trusted, as Benjamin and Derrida maintain, what is the significance of Synge’s writing *The Playboy of the Western World* in the unique Irish English, and what may be the implication? Declan Kiberd’s comment on Synge’s use of language in literary creation is illuminating in this respect.

Synge’s literary sensibility found its fullest expression in the manoeuvre between Irish and English .... This genius went far deeper than a conventional flair for turning a piece of Irish poetry or prose into English. It involved a capacity to project a whole Gaelic culture in English. Each of Synge’s works is an act of supreme translation: the language of his plays is based less on the English spoken in rural Ireland than on the peculiar brand of English spoken in *Gaeltacht* areas. This English is instantaneous and literal translation from Irish.  
(1996, p. 626)

Kiberd suggests that Synge’s success lies in his de facto role as a translator whose creative rendition not only enriches the English expressions but helps preserve the Irish language. While Synge adopts Irish English to reflect the everyday conversation of the people living in the rural area, traditional Irish culture and customs are integrated with English to form a new language. Therefore, instead of sticking to the Irish language to mark their de-colonising efforts as many cultural nationalists do, Synge’s translation in-between Irish and English, as well as Irish culture and British culture, signifies “an emerging *heteroglossia*, a polymorphous language system pushing against the unitary language systems of Irish and eighteenth-century Enlightenment English, setting yet another precedent for the interrelationship between literature and politics in Ireland” (Keating-Miller, 2009, p. 13).

In a nutshell, the hybridity of language in Synge’s plays testifies to both/and philosophy prevalent in Irish society. This duality typical of Synge’s language echoes Seamus Heaney’s notion of the double-ness of Irish identity. According to Heaney, an either/or mentality is not common in Ireland, while a both/and mindset is everywhere in the daily life of the Irish (1990, pp. 21-23). This penchant for dualities may have to do with the ages-long conflicts many Irish people are accustomed to (e.g., oppositions such as England/Ireland, Protestant/Catholic, and English/Irish), which leave them little alternative but to learn to compromise between a range of extremes to survive in the always already contradictory and antagonistic Irish society. In brief, Synge’s language strategy demonstrates almost but not the same identity politics, one that is not characterised by resistance and opposition but features diversity, hybridity, and multiplicity. This inherent complexity of language in Synge’s works can be further complicated when translators make different translation attempts because, as new translation versions are presented, the textual meanings embedded in Synge’s original texts invariably engender re-reading, re-interpretation,

and even deconstruction.

Notwithstanding their individual interpretations, Perng's and Chang's translations share something in common. In the first place, both were published in Taiwan. Additionally, both translators were committed to the translation task not for drama performance but for sharing and promoting Synge's plays. In other words, both translations were meant to be read, not to be acted out on stage. In Perng's work, some other plays by Synge, such as *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), *Riders to the Sea* (1904), and *Deirdre of Sorrows* (1910), were rendered. This collection of Synge's translations was published in 1970 by Tamkang University, Taiwan, alongside some collected translations of other famous playwrights such as W. B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey, and Samuel Beckett. Although Perng's renditions were not used for performance, they helped many undergraduates, postgraduates, and people interested in studying plays in their reading. Invited by Bookman Books, Taipei, to publish a new translation of *The Playboy of the Western World*, Chang attempted to bring new meanings to this literary canon in the twenty-first century, published forty-two years after Perng's translation. According to Irish scholar Chuang Kunliang, despite the difficulty of translating Synge's idiosyncratic blend of Irish and English, Chang's translation is fluent, precise, and highly readable (Chang, 2012, pp. 13-14). Although Chang's version was not intended to be acted out, in 2016, his translation was adopted with minor modifications by senior students at the Department of Drama and Theater, National Taiwan University, in their graduation production of *The Playboy of the Western World* (《我用鋤頭殺了我老爹》, "I Killed My Dad with an Axe" literally). As renowned theater actor Yao Kun Jun notes, this adaptation reflects the younger generation's antipathy toward oppression and hierarchy in contemporary Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> Altogether, despite the difficulties rendering Synge's text across languages and cultures, both translations showcase ongoing interests in reading, interpreting, and translating Synge in the Asian context. It is worth noting that both Chinese translations alert readers to the peculiarity of the Irish English widely used in *The Playboy of the Western World*. Compared to Standard English, this variant use of language, as evidenced by the unusual spelling, syntax, grammar, and musicality, connotes Synge's cultural identity with his language identity. The unique language characteristics manifest when the source language is translated into another language. While the dominance of Standard English gives way to the multiplicity of variant English and the translations, the legitimacy of English is cast into doubt, and the hegemony of British colonisation is challenged. It implies that Synge deconstructs the dominance of Standard English and subsequently the supremacy of British culture by adopting Irish English. This endeavour is evidenced by the Chinese translations discussed previously.

## CONCLUSION

Unlike many cultural essentialists who adhere to the supremacy of Irish traditions, Synge demonstrates a much more flexible approach to the local community and its indigenous culture. Adopting Irish English as a medium for his dramatic productions showcases Synge's pragmatism in using language, demonstrating his linguistic strategy to present a similar but not the same language. In the meantime, this similar but not identical choice of language demarcates a peculiar identity, linguistic, cultural, and national, common in twentieth-century Ireland. Crucially, as the textual meaning is decentered in the process of translation, ranging from Synge's translation via the lens of Hiberno-English to Perng's and Chang's Chinese renditions, the validity and reliability

of Standard English becomes increasingly untenable. This language feature showcases Synge's Irish identity, as evidenced by *The Playboy of the Western World* and the selected Chinese translations.

If textual meaning, literary interpretation, and translation are as fluctuating as deconstructionists claim, Synge's writings and renditions will undergo incessant re-writing, revision, and re-interpretation. When Synge's plays are situated in a larger context, people involved in the (re-)writing project will include the playwright and the other writers writing after him and translators of his plays worldwide. As we evaluate Synge and his works in retrospect, he is undoubtedly a pioneer who stands ahead in showcasing the hybridity of language and the diversity of culture popular in a contemporary, ever-increasingly globalised world in the twenty-first century.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more information, please refer to <http://artnews.freedom-men.com/archives/25005>.

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